

## something soft and soaked in pain by theproblematicgay

**Series:** [all your love and your longing \[1\]](#)

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** M/M

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

She never asks about why he stays at Steve's most nights. She's 95% sure she doesn't need to ask, though.

Billy would get this whole other look on his face when Steve wasn't looking. It was soft, something that felt out of place on Billy, but in a good way; *hopeful*.

"Are they-?" Will hesitates, as if looking for the right word. "Are they-?" He pauses again, and gives up after a moment.

"So you see it too, right?" She grins.

# 1. louder than sirens, louder than bells (sweeter than heaven and hotter than hell)

## Author's Note:

•just some points I would like to clarify:

- I feel like Max wouldn't have internalised any of the homophobia she's clearly being brought up around in the series and any lgbt+ education is pretty damn rare back then (so she obviously doesn't understand bisexuality) - she isn't homophobic, just curious & a little confused I guess (any questions are welcome)

- Discovery Channel actually was launched in 1985 (yes, I googled it when I was writing; that can be your fact of the day, you're welcome)

- I'm not condoning or writing Max as condoning any of Billy's behaviour (whether it's canonical or just in this fic)

- I am extremely grateful to everyone who has commented, gave kudos or just read any of my fics - thank you so much (I'm also in the middle of working on two spideypool things atm too so)

- Go read *Lymricks' You'll Lose the Blues in Chicago* series cause it's honestly beautiful and one of the best things I've ever read. If you haven't read it I'm doing you a favour, dude. I'm literally in the middle of rereading it for like the thousandth time

Honestly, she's half-convinced that Billy's started to realise she and Steve leave too many lights on than is probably necessary at this point, that he must have made some connection between the two by now. She knows he wonders about what happened that fall, even if he's never asked. She thinks it's probably because of the looks on their faces whenever anything about last December is brought up; that and how she never asks about why he stays at Steve's most nights.

She's also 95% sure she doesn't need to ask.

Billy's leaning heavily on the counter, stirring soup when Max finally wanders back into the kitchen. She'd hastily made for her room when Neil had asked him about where he'd disappeared to last night, opened the window and sat on the porch until her mom and Neil finally headed out for the night, ruffling her hair on the way with something like affection.

"What're you making?" She offers, hesitantly standing with the table between them.

She sees him bristle, not expecting her to (unintentionally) corner him. "Dinner," he shrugs.

He tries to pick up the pan one-handedly, cradling the other against his abdomen and nearly burns himself so Max figures she has no other choice than to gently elbow him out of the way and take the pan. He huffs, like he doesn't know whether to be an asshole or grateful, and sits down heavily at the table. She sets the bowls of soup down, pushing one in front of him.

He stares intently at the table, head down until she taps a spoon against his bowl repeatedly. She bites her lip hard when he finally meets her eye, swallows and goes back to her soup, doesn't mention the blood drying beneath his eye or the swelling of his lip.

She wants to ask if he'll leave to see Steve Harrington again tonight, but she figures since he hasn't asked if she'd heard anything she keeps her mouth shut.

When her mom steps into her room at eleven, hours later, runs a hand through her hair and kisses her on the forehead to say goodnight, she thinks about Billy's mom, about what she had been like, what had happened to her, and if he ever thinks of her.

The next morning, Billy's in his car before she's even out of bed.

~

She knows Steve has helped Billy the past few months, but she isn't

sure if it's really helping anything when she opens the door to the bathroom and finds Billy on the counter, Steve stood between his legs. Their faces are closer than is probably necessary considering the seemingly-forgotten bag of frozen peas in Steve's hand.

They jump apart, like they *do* have something to hide, like her step-brother and sometimes-babysitter totally *weren't* seconds from boning one another.

She purses her lips, just a little bit stunned, and turns on her heel without a word between them, closing the door behind her quietly.

She's glad Billy has someone like Steve, thinks that he's probably good for him. He'd asked Hopper to drive him to the hospital this morning so he could drive Billy home 'cause of the new cast on his hand and the painkillers he'd been given.

She's grateful, maybe even more than Billy - 'cause she's sure Billy hasn't said *thank you*. At least, not in any traditional sense.

When they eventually leave the bathroom, looking unsure, she's sat with her feet up on the table reading the comic Dustin had practically forced on her, ranting about educating her. They talk in the kitchen under their breath, like they're trying to be subtle. She can make out certain words like '*understand*' and '*can't*' and '*fuck*.'

When Steve leaves, he shoots her an uncertain glance but smiles nonetheless. She hopes he can see that she's grateful.

~

Dustin is wary of her brother, she knows that, can see that Mike and Lucas don't like him, which is fair. Half of the time she feels the same.

Eleven and Will are the only friends she has that Billy hasn't left an impression on yet, despite Mike's somewhat exaggerated retelling of that night nearly three months ago now. She'd punched him in the arm when he'd chosen the word '*evil*' to describe Billy. Eleven and Will had just stayed confused and wary in the end.

Dustin adores Steve, so while it's debatable that he could come around, she's pretty sure he's got more reason to dislike Billy. She ends up dragging Will along. He nearly crashes his bike into a tree when the neighbour's dog starts barking.

They avoid the front of the house for fear of being seen and abandon their bikes around the back where they're less likely to be spotted.

"Just climb up. No, no- you just *kicked* me."

"Sorry."

"Just put your leg over. It's not *that* high, Will. It's like climbing a fence."

"You're not sneaking me into your room to kill me are you?" She doesn't know why, but it makes her smile that Will believes she's capable.

"Just get over, Byers." She shoves Will through her cracked window unceremoniously once he finally gets his head and arms through, not laughing whatsoever when he hits his head and whines like a wounded dog. "Think of it as karma," she shrugs.

Will looks up at her in mock contempt. "Why am I here again?"

"*What are you doing?*" Her walkie flares to life where it's lying on the end of her bed.

She grabs for it hastily. "*Billy?*"

"*Look out the window, dumbass.*"

She and Will whip their heads around so fast that Will yelps and something in her neck clicks.

"What are *you* doing?" She parrots.

Billy's leaning against the windowpane, an eyebrow raised and expression caught somewhere between amused and exasperated. Before he tosses the walkie he has in hand onto the bed, Will pats his back pocket, looking sheepish for having dropped it and not realised.

Billy rolls his eyes. "If you're gonna keep sneaking in and out," he shoots a look at Will, "especially with boys, then I suggest you get better at it." With that, he saunters off toward the porch.

Something in his eyes, in the way he offers the advice, tells Max there's probably more meaning behind his words than he's letting on. She knows he's speaking from experience; he used to sneak girls into his room all the time back in California. And though he'd gotten better at not waking his dad up, Max had heard him every single time. Even the one time he'd snuck his best friend in through his bedroom window and they'd had to climb up on the garage, a bottle of something strong enough to have Billy giggling in hand as it clinked against the glass as they'd passed her window.

Neil had been really pissed that time, enough to break Billy's arm. She'd sat with him in the hospital the next morning, doodling on his cast while he'd been high on whatever the nurse had given him for the pain whilst tutting about *kids drinking these days*.

Even though he'd been so out of it that he didn't care about the flowers and hearts drawn in sharpie on his cast, she could tell something had changed. The day after that he'd yelled at her for using the phone and made her cry. An hour later, he had made cookies with her, 'cause even back then he hadn't been very verbal with his apologies or gratitude.

Despite the fact that he'd stopped acting like he was sorry, like he was grateful for things - like he cared - she can tell he still is, still does. It rests somewhere behind the malicious grins, the irritated turn of his lip, the way his hands shake around his grip on the wheel when he drives them both to school every morning.

She sees it in the heavy exhaustion that smothers his every move.

"Steve should be here soon," she waves her hand in invitation toward the growing pile of Dustin and Lucas' stolen comics.

Will picks one up, frowning. "Isn't this Du-"

"He hasn't missed it enough to ask." She shrugs.

Will seems to catch up then. "Wait- why's Steve coming here?" He looks vaguely concerned, as if a demo-dog is about to leap through

the window.

She waves him off again, 'cause she knows it frustrates him. "You'll see."

~

Will is crouched beside her underneath Billy's bedroom window - 'cause his room happens to have a great view of the porch - with a bag of chips between them as they routinely sneak a glance outside and then duck back down out of sight before Billy or Steve have the chance to spot them.

"Are they-?" He hesitates, as if looking for the right word. "Are they-?" He pauses again, and gives up after a moment.

"So you see it too, right?" She grins at him, probably looking just a little too relieved with the wild glint in her eyes that apparently comes with being a Hargrove.

"I thought they were supposed to hate each other? Didn't they have that big fight last year?"

She grabs a handful of the chips - she'd, admittedly, found them on Billy's bed, and if she eats enough of them then it'll be worth it when he eventually finds out that she'd stolen them. "Yeah, but I guess they made up," she shrugs and sits down.

Steve and Billy are sat outside on the porch, sharing a cigarette and talking. Every now and then, Steve'll laugh and Billy'll flick his tongue across his teeth like some kind of animal, the kind Max has seen on the Discovery Channel.

"If you chew any louder they're gonna hear us. Billy will skin me alive if he knows I'm in his room."

"What the *fuck* are you doing?"

Max doesn't even turn to see the look on Billy's face as the door slams open, just yanks the window open, gets a good grip on Will's sleeve and dives right out the window onto the grass.

Steve is still sat on the porch, eyebrows furrowed and cigarette between his fingers. He seems more confused at Will's presence when he tumbles right after her.

"Do you have a death wish?" Will pants, looking horrified and terror-stricken.

She realises a little belatedly that out of everyone she'd befriended last year, she'd spent the least amount of time with Will - considering that he'd been stuck in another dimension and the hospital for the most part.

"You'll get used to it." She flips her hair over her shoulder and waves to Steve - who waves back, looking infinitely confused - before grabbing her bike and escaping with Will before Billy can come charging after them.

~

So Will had agreed that she was probably right. To be fair, it wasn't like Billy or Steve were being subtle, especially not together. Steve would get this look in his eye that she had previously thought all guys had reserved for directing just at girls. She hadn't stopped to consider the fact that people were *actually gay*, had thought everyone was too busy trying to avoid being called gay.

But, Billy would get this whole other look on his face when Steve wasn't looking - and when he didn't know that she was. She'd seen Mike stare at El the same way when she was too busy trying to impress the boys or get them out of something ridiculously stupid without them hurting themselves - something she'd usually gotten them into in the first place. It was soft, something that felt out of place on Billy, but in a good way; *hopeful*. It made her want to



threaten Steve as much as she loved him.

All six of them are in Mike's basement, waiting for Mike to get his shit together when Dustin asks how they're gonna get to the arcade tomorrow with Nancy sick and Jonathan sceptical about leaving her alone for a few hours when nobody else is home.

She blurts out, "I can ask Billy," before she can really think it through.

"No offence," Mike grimaces, "but your brother's a psychopath."

"Step-brother," she corrects automatically, "and he's not. It'll be fine."

When he picks her up outside the Wheelers' house, all she can repeat in her head is *it'll be fine*. She doesn't even realise that Billy is talking until he's halfway through his sentence, which is weird, 'cause Billy hardly ever talks to her, as short and to-the-point as he can get without trying out telepathy.

"-so I'd appreciate it if you kept your trap shut."

She doesn't want to ask *what?* and sound dumb, so before she can really consider the consequences, she asks, "Why?" instead.

Billy grinds his teeth together. "Why do you think, Max?" he snaps, something feral in his eyes, like a cornered animal. "If you say the wrong thing to my dad-" He stops himself, looking like he's biting his tongue really hard.

She knows it's definitely an unspoken thing, even though she knows he knows that she knows everything. It's enough to give her a fucking headache.

"Your dad's an asshole."

Billy lets out a string of uncontrollable and slightly-hysterical pained laughter despite the ferocious look on his face that screams '*yeah, I fucking know.*' His hands tighten around the wheel until his knuckles

turn white.

“Will you drive me, Lucas and El to the arcade tomorrow? Nancy’s sick.”

“What about Harrington? He’d be fucking happy to do it,” he *almost* whines. It’s a scary thing.

“He’s taking Mike, Dustin and Will. Not enough room in his car.” She shrugs again, thinking she’s probably on the verge of doing it too much lately.

Billy sighs, and while she knows it doesn't mean he's agreeing exactly, it definitely doesn't mean he isn't.

~

It’s slightly awkward, even if El doesn’t know it, when she, Lucas and Eleven all pile into Billy’s car pretending not to notice his scowl.

El has that look about her, her listening face, which usually means she’s about to know something she probably shouldn’t. She’d warned her that Billy didn’t know anything and would most definitely freak out if she used her powers to do any weird shit in the car.

She stares intently at Billy for a few minutes, and when his hand must start aching suddenly underneath the cast and he hisses, her face falls, turns sombre. It’s something like smothering a light. Max doesn't miss the way her eyes harden though and she yells without really saying anything at all, *please don't say anything*. She must understand 'cause she simply grits her jaw and glares out the window silently, looking like she could very well grind grown men three times her size beneath her heel.

When Billy pulls up outside the arcade and all three of them clamber out, she doesn't expect him to get out as well. He leans against his car and makes to light up a cigarette when El approaches him.

It's clear he doesn't know what to do, what he's supposed to say to Max's weird friends, hasn't known since the night she'd almost castrated him.

El has been taught the proper protocol for such a situation though apparently because she sticks out her hand without hesitation, even when Lucas watches her as if he expects Billy to bite it off.

Billy accepts it, takes her hand sort of gingerly, as if his bicep isn't about the size of her head, as if she isn't a fourteen year old girl.

Max knows better, obviously, she's heard about El flipping cars without so much as moving a finger, but now she isn't so sure that Billy doesn't. He has that look on his face that she'd had the first time she'd seen El for the terrifying yet gentle whirlwind she is.

When she smiles softly up at Billy, who towers above her, easily twice her size, and he looks like trapped rabbit, pinned there under her gaze, she can't help but grin at the picture the two of them make. She lets his hand go as Steve's car pulls up alongside the Camaro and she doesn't think she's ever seen Billy look so grateful, almost relieved despite the sense Max gets that there's something like peace settling in his chest, the same thing she feels whenever El does her thing. It shows on his face, like how replacing an old lightbulb would brighten a room.

She and Will glance over their shoulders every few minutes, watching Steve and Billy pass the cigarette between them as they lean against his car. The nods they share are lost on the others, though she can never really be sure about El and what she knows. Judging from her slight smile, an inconspicuous thing but bright nonetheless, Max is guessing she was right all along.

When they finally see Steve reach out, his hand linger over Billy's where it's resting on the hood of his car, they trade knowing looks.

## 2. Her Fight and Fury

### Notes for the Chapter:

*'Her fight and fury is fiery,  
but she loves,  
like sleep to the freezing.'*  
- Cherry Wine, Hozier

The kid is staring at him, unflinching. Billy is praying that Harrington and the rest of Max's goddamn friends would hurry the *fuck up*. He sits there, wishing for the diner to spontaneously catch fire, for the waitress to cause a scene, for Tommy and Carol to walk through the door and start shit - anything, fuck, *anything* that means he can stop pretending like he isn't awkward as hell.

"Papa."

He whips his head around to stare at her, eyes guarded, hard. "What?"

Her eyes are on his hands, the way his fingers are twisting together, the scar that runs along the length of the back of his hand and two of his fingers from the time he'd broken it so badly he'd needed surgery. It's cold out; Indiana mornings always cold enough to leave his fingernails a shade of blue and any scars left somewhat purple and aching.

It's something in her expression that makes Billy flinch.

She doesn't smile, but her eyes soften a little. "Bad man." Her voice is steady, unwavering.

He breathes deeply through his nose, gritting his teeth.

He's kind of pissed at the Chief for dumping his daughter on him when he knew, he fucking *knew* that Billy can barely stand the kid he has to live with, let alone someone else's, one he shouldn't have to deal with, one that doesn't seem to know what blinking or boundaries are right now.

He was actually pretty surprised that Hopper had left them alone.

He'd seen the blatant warning in his eyes - the *if-you-teach-my-kid-to-swear-I'll-gut-you* kind of look - but he's almost certain there'd been something amused in his expression as the kid had waved him off happily, turning to Billy with bright eyes.

He gets it now.  
Hopper's an *asshole*.

"Hey guys, what can I get you?" The waitress practically sings as she bustles over to the booth.

"Eggos." The kid grins. "Please," she adds, like an afterthought.

The waitress, Deanna, judging from her name tag, frowns a little. "We have waffles?" El cocks her head slightly, a question in her eyes. "They taste better, to be honest."

The kid smiles enthusiastically, nodding.

She turns to him then. "So, what can I get you then, honey?" Billy orders a stack of pancakes and another for Max, her insistence to order for herself be damned given that he's the one paying. "You having a nice day out? Your sister's real cute."

El is too busy ripping up napkins and piling up the pieces to even acknowledge what the waitress is saying anymore and by the time Billy can grimace and choke out, "She's not my-" *Deanna* has already been called over by the next table.

He ignores the kid and decides to wait in hostile silence for *someone* - hell, even Henderson would do - to arrive and end his suffering already. He glances back down at his hand and runs a thumb over the marbled scar.

*"You're so ungrateful," - hands fisted in the collar of his shirt - "after everything we've done for you," - cold linoleum against the bare skin of his forearms, under his fingers as he falls - "pathetic," - a sickening crunch, his right hand underneath one of his father's work boots - the smell of the hospital - "you're gonna need surgery to put it right, I'm afraid, son," - the lingering taste of anaesthetic in his mouth -*

He jerks into sudden awareness again when a plate is set down in

front of him. He tries to plaster on his smile - the one that makes everything either okay or just go away, the one that had left Wheeler's *mom* blushing, for fuck's sake - but it ends up strained, like his lip is swollen again. Deanna smiles. Something maternal and pitying flashes in her eyes.

El is watching him closely, fingers curled like little walls around her pile of napkin remains. Billy spears his pancake with a little more force than is probably necessary; the kid doesn't seem put off in the slightest from staring like he's a zoo exhibit anyway though.

He's raising his fork to his mouth when she purposefully blows on the pile and sends them scattered all over Billy and the table.

"Hey, guys." Max strides over to the booth. "Wow, you're actually early; Hopper's never on time." She doesn't even ask about why there are pieces of napkin littered all over Billy, just smiles at her friend, as if she knows too. Everybody's just an asshole it seems.

"Can you just hurry the fuck up so I can drive you and go already?" He rolls his eyes, shovelling his pancakes down after nudging Max's plate toward her.

Max rolls her eyes but picks up her knife and fork with a smirk. He's a little shocked when the waffles arrive and El practically rips into them. Max just smiles again.

Wheeler and Henderson shuffle in through the door not long after that, tailed by Harrington who's in the middle of one of his lectures. "I told you dickheads to tell me about this shit. You can't just call at midnight and ask me out of the blue if I can drive you to the movies tomorrow." Steve sits down heavily beside him, huffing like headed toward an early grave. "That's the kind of thing that gives people heart-attacks, you shits. I thought something was wrong."

He seems to finish his lecture there, taking a moment to catch his breath before turning to acknowledge Billy and smiling a little in his direction.

Between the two of them, they take up the whole of their side of the booth, leaving El, Wheeler and Max elbow-to-elbow with one another and Henderson pouting.

“Just pull up a chair, Jesus,” Steve sighs. He turns back to Billy, face screaming *help me hide the bodies and I’ll be forever grateful*, which Billy translates to *I will suck your dick if you can get them to shut up for five minutes* in his head. “Hey.”

Steve sounds exhausted, like he didn’t sleep again last night. That, combined with driving his parents to the nearest airport - *Indianapolis*, for the record, which fucking *sucks* - after three days spent with them, asking how school was going, if he was still seeing that nice Nancy girl, what universities he was thinking of applying to, Billy knows he has to be dead on his feet by now.

“Hey,” he breathes in reply.

Wheeler is trying and failing to be acknowledged by El, who’s too busy stuffing waffles in her face to even give him the time of day, while Steve orders two cups of coffee.

They come black, no milk, no sugar but Billy isn’t fussy so he reaches for one. Steve slaps his hand back, almost spilling the coffee he’s got in hand.

“Order your own.” He grumbles.

Billy just chuckles under his breath and wraps an arm around Steve’s shoulders, leaning in close to whisper, “Has someone had a bad day?” He turns his face, pressed against Steve’s, so that he’s pretty sure no one can see when he flicks his tongue across Harrington’s ear. “Do you want me to make it better, pretty boy?” His voice is low enough that it doesn’t carry.

Steve makes a strangled sound though, and that’s enough to capture the kids’ attention, even El who’s still got at least two mouthfuls left on her plate.

“Leave Steve alone,” Henderson gripes, flicking Max in the arm when she smiles, syrup spilling from between her lips. “You people have no social etiquette, do you?”

“What’s that?” Max asks through a mouthful of pancake. A droplet of syrup lands on Henderson’s cheek and the resulting screech has her bent over the table laughing.

Harrington is smiling absently, watching them smack at one another until Max gets an arm around Henderson's neck and rubs her knuckles over his scalp. He surrenders pretty quickly after that, shrieking for Wheeler to help him. He's left hanging, Wheeler too busy making moon-eyes at the girl who seems pretty uninterested in him at the moment to notice.

Harrington picks out a stray piece of napkin from his hair that Billy mustn't have brushed off and looks at it with confusion and just a little concern, as if Billy is going around ripping up napkins in his fits of rage. He figures it'd probably be healthier than looking for fights that leave him either with bruised fists or a bloody lip and a black eye.

He leans in again while the little shits are busy occupying themselves. "Wanna head to mine after?"

Billy smirks. "Sure thing."

His eyes flick back to the Chief's kid. She's gonna be real pretty when she's older, Billy can tell, like Sally Green from his English class. Wheeler's gonna realise how lucky he got pretty damn quick once they're in high school. He watches her finally turn to him and light up.

He watches Steve for a second out the corner of his eye as he sips at his second cup of coffee, thinks he's still fucking pretty, even with the shadows under his eyes.

El reaches over and steals his napkin. He rolls his eyes, not ready for another round of this. Before he can tell Steve to move though, he notices the little doodle on her arm where her sleeves are pushed up to her elbows. He squints at it, trying to make out what it says while she's still. 011.

The more he looks, the more it starts to look like a tattoo, not sharpie or pen. He tilts his head as she starts ripping up his napkin but it's quickly noticed. She glances up at him, eyebrows furrowed before looking down at her arm. She yanks her sleeve down hastily, leaving the other still bunched up at her elbow.

He shoves Harrington out of the booth so he can get up. "Gonna



smoke.” Steve just sighs after him exasperatedly.

~

Max is done with Dustin’s shit. She doesn’t know why Lucas and Will had to cancel and leave her with ‘*social etiquette*’ and the love-birds. Not forgetting El and moon-eyes either.

She’s pretty sure the whole point of boyfriends and best friends is to help her bully her other best friends into shutting their mouth.

El watches Billy from out the window where he’s leaning against his car and lighting up a cigarette. He catches her gaze, must feel it on him, and narrows his eyes before turning his back to her like a child. El smiles as if he’d waved at her.

Dustin pokes her in the arm. “Did you steal the comic on my desk last week?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She steals the last of Billy’s pancakes, blinking innocently.

“Is he still an asshole?” Mike asks, watching El watch Billy from the parking lot. “Cause he sure seems like one still.”

Max looks at Steve before she answers, sees the way he bites his tongue. “He’s still angry, anyone can see that. I don’t know, I guess, it’s sort of like he doesn’t care anymore.” She shrugs, making patterns with her fork in the syrup left on the plate. “He’s different though, now.”

Steve smiles a little at that, as if he’s proud, head down so the tug of his mouth is smothered in the material of his pullover.

“I want that comic back, by the way.”

She sighs. “Yeah, okay, whatever.”

Dustin’s quiet for a minute, then, “Does he still,” he pauses. “Does he

still, you know, have violent tendencies?”

“*Violent tendencies?*” Steve snorts. “No. Not anymore at least.” Max shoots him a knowing look. “*What?* We talk.” Steve shrugs him off, defensive.

“You do more than fucking talk,” she murmurs under her breath, fighting a laugh at Steve’s mortification when he registers what she’d meant.

Dustin just frowns at the both of them, bewildered.

~

Billy’s nails are blue by the time Steve comes looking for him out in the parking lot. “Hey, you okay?”

He nods. “You know that kid, El?” Steve stiffens a little bit, like he isn’t sure what he’s about to be asked. “Does she have a tattoo?” He touches his own wrist, about where he’d seen the numbers etched into her skin. “Isn’t she like, twelve?” He grimaces.

Steve licks his lip, looks at Billy for a long time before he answers. “Fifteen. Hopper adopted her. S’why no one really officially knew about her until a few weeks ago.”

“That doesn’t explain why-”

“Her mom was pretty sick. Couldn’t look after her. She ended up with some people who did shit to her, thought she was special.” Billy tries to imagine what Steve could even mean by that. “She didn’t really have a childhood, I guess,” he shrugs. “She’s alright now. She’ll be fine. She can sure as hell look out for herself.” Harrington sounds just a little wary, like how Billy’s heard Max sound sometimes, like he’s missing some vital part of the fucking joke.

He plucks the cigarette from between Billy’s fingers when he’s too busy looking back at the diner, through the window where he can see

the kid laughing with Wheeler about something.

“C’mon,” he gets in his car, shoving his hands between his thighs for warmth while he waits for Harrington to get with the programme. “Round up the kids and then we can head back to yours.”

Steve smirks. “Sounds like a plan.”

~

She knows she shouldn’t torture him, ‘cause God knows this is so much better than him going back to being an unbearable asshole.

“Did you move my skateboard?” He cocks an eyebrow at her from the sofa. “I can’t find it. I think I left it in the kitchen.”

She’d spotted the skateboard propped against the wall by her bed almost immediately, the one that definitely wasn’t hers ‘cause it was so much better than the one that she has. *Had* - Billy’d broken it a few months back now. She’d been borrowing Lily’s brother’s old one for a while now, the girl who lived a couple doors down the street.

“I don’t know, try your room.” He rolls his eyes, turning back to the TV. “S’your shit, not mine.”

She heads back to her room, smiling.

~

Mike’s basement is cluttered with Eggo boxes, some old batteries, broken walkie-talkies and an Olympus camera, rolls of undeveloped film scattered across his desk. She already knows what twenty of the twenty-eight frames in most of the rolls will be of, judging from the way he’s making moon-eyes at El again.

Dustin, Will and Lucas are too busy setting up D&D to make fun of him for it so she decides to step up.

“Dude, just take a picture, it’ll last longer,” she elbows him, holding up one of the rolls of film and smirks. “But I guess you’ve already done that.”

El is snickering under her breath and leans over, grinning when they fist-bump like Max taught her.

“Aren’t you even a little bit worried, El? That he’ll get obsessive and stalker-y and shit? Make a mask out of your skin or something?” Mike makes a face and she can’t help but cackle. Billy used to call it her ‘witch laugh’ back when they barely knew each other, a month into their mom and dad’s marriage.

He groans dismissively. “You’ve been watching way too much *Texas Chainsaw*.”

“Dude, Halloween’s like, weeks away. It’s *tradition*.”

“It’s not even October yet, you freak.”

She shrugs, turning to look over her shoulder. “How long does it take, guys? Come on, Billy’ll be picking me up in a few hours.”

Dustin’s got that look on his face, like he wants to ask a question but isn’t sure if it’s stupid or not.

“What?” She narrows her eyes.

“Do you really think Billy’s changed?”

She hesitates, sucking on her lip for a second. “I don’t know. He’s still an asshole, but - *different*.”

“He spends a lot of time with Steve,” Lucas joins in, glancing up at her face to gauge her reaction, as if he and everyone else in the room doesn’t have every reason to be wary of her brother. “He hurt him real bad last year.”

She nods absently, thinking back. There’d been a moment - sometime

between Billy straddling Steve, fists slick with blood, and the feel of the bat in her hands as she stood over her brother, the syringe slick with sweat between her fingers - where she'd thought the night wasn't going to end without one of them dead. She hadn't known if it was gonna be Steve or Billy, or any one of them in the end.

Sometimes, she'll wake up in the dead of night, believing she's in those Tunnels that *have* to still run underneath the town, maybe beneath her house.

She hadn't known what she was going to do, what she was ultimately prepared to do when she'd picked up Steve's bat that night. She's glad that she hadn't thought to pick it up first.

"I think it changed him," she speaks quietly, like the words are delicate and fragile; like if she's too loud, Billy might hear from across town and, out of stubbornness and spite, revert back to that person he had been, still might be sometimes. If he is, she hasn't seen him since that night at the Byers'. "I mean, it changed *us*, right?"

Lucas frowns at the floor, thinking. Mike stays quiet for once.

"Aren't you worried about Steve though?" Dustin meets her eyes, something concerned and caring in his own.

She understands that like how Billy is her step-brother, even if she never asked for one, Steve is like Dustin's honorary brother. She'd always care for Billy in some way or another, and she has to remember sometimes that Dustin would adopt Steve into his family in a heartbeat, technically already has in some ways. She can understand the worry.

"I think they're good for each other."

"Yeah," Mike confesses, "we are four years younger than him. It's probably good he at least talks to someone his age."

Will wrinkles his nose, laughing silently. "What are you, fifty?"

"Shut up."

"Why are you taking-" Dustin starts, but Mike isn't listening, cuts him

off.

He's craning his neck to see out of the little basement window. "No, *shut up*; be quiet," he hisses.

They all turn to the window just in time to watch it light up like a beacon, painting the basement in streaks of white artificial light. For one terror-stricken second they simultaneously hold their breath, half-convinced that it's *something*, like the Mind-Flayer is back, like the light is going to swallow them whole through the glass, as if the gate has been torn open once more.

Then it passes, and they hear the low rumbling of the car, too conspicuous for anything from the Upside-Down, too pretentious for it to be anything- *anyone* other than Billy. They take another second to breathe.

El, from where she's still sat on the sofa, murmurs quietly, "Oh no."

Max doesn't even wait to hear what she has to say, doesn't wait for Lucas to follow after her or for Mrs. Wheeler to tell her Billy's waiting for her in the drive 'cause she's already racing outside before Billy even has time to kill the engine.

She stops in front of the car, can't see him or through the windshield at all 'cause of the headlights.

She steps around to the door slowly, a little hesitant.

She knows something has to be wrong; El had looked worried, just a little scared, and Billy's *never* early, never late, is always on time 'cause she knows it'd be his fault if he didn't get her home by half eight.

The only times he's ever early is when Neil's specifically asked, when he *has to be*.

She sees him through the window, waiting for him to open the door or at least roll down the window so she can ask what-

His hands are shaking where they're resting on the wheel. His eyes are shut; she doesn't think he's even seen her yet. His face is screwed up in that way no one ever allows themselves to unless they're trying not to cry, trying not to give into it.

“Do you have to go?” Lucas calls over from where they’re all crowded by the door. He doesn’t make to come any closer. She’s grateful.

She throws him a strained smile. “Yeah, I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

When she turns back to the car, Billy’s eyes are on her; they’re red, bloodshot. She makes her way over to the passenger side, knowing that Billy’s only letting himself shake apart ‘cause nobody else can watch it happen. He doesn’t switch off the headlights.

She doesn’t ask if he’s okay.

There’s blood slowly trickling from his eyebrow, into his eye, and where his hair has curled up, brushed against his face, it’s matted with a streak of red. He’s moved one hand to press against his side.

Instead, she asks, “You want me to drive?” She speaks like everything’s fine, like he isn’t clutching his side and blinking the blood from his left eye.

He doesn’t answer, and for a second, she’s scared he’s gonna slump over the wheel. He just shakes his head minutely.

She bites her tongue for a few minutes that pass in silence where he doesn’t move an inch. She doesn’t know if it’s the right thing to ask, but she doesn’t know what else to do; “Do you want me to call Steve?”

There’s no reaction, not like she’s expecting. Billy just stares straight ahead.

She grabs for the door handle a little desperately and darts back inside. Lucas and Dustin are standing beside the staircase and they turn to her, concerned.

“Do you have Steve’s number?” She knows Dustin’ll have it, hell, she’ll be surprised if he hasn’t memorised it by now.

They look confused, like they want to ask, but something on her face has Dustin heading for the phone, has Lucas reaching for her arm, no questions.

She hugs him, tightly, ‘cause she doesn’t know what she’s doing, just

that it needs to be done and Lucas is warm and comforting and she never wants to let go. "Thanks," she sniffs, refusing to cry just because she's scared.

She punches him lightly in the arm and he smiles at her, bright and reassuring.

She hears Dustin from the kitchen, just a little shrill with the panic lacing his voice. "No- no. Max wanted me to call you. I don't know, she looks worried."

She takes the receiver and asks Steve to come by the Wheeler's. She doesn't mention Billy, or that he's parked outside, or that it's as if he's been switched off, like he's disconnected or something, but before she puts the phone down, Steve asks her, "*Is he alright?*"

She doesn't know how to answer that, doesn't understand how Steve knew. She still wouldn't have been sure how to answer that yesterday morning when he'd laughed with her on the way to school, his lip healed and no bruises or scabs on his knuckles; or last week when he'd propped that skateboard up by her bed and then pretended he hadn't, like an unspoken offering.

"I don't know." She wishes she knew.

~

Neil is sat on the sofa, a beer in hand where he's leant toward the TV, elbows on his knees. It's as if he doesn't notice Steve, an arm around his son's waist, guiding Billy through the door and across the room.

Max trails after them a little helplessly, gripping Billy's hand where it's limp at his side. If she's hurting him, straining some other injury she doesn't know about, he doesn't even wince.

~



Billy's sat on his bed, shirtless (it had been unbuttoned completely anyway, serving absolutely no purpose) as Steve presses gentle fingers to his side against the blooming bruises there.

"What happened?"

Max doesn't bother telling him that it's no use. Billy hasn't uttered a word the entire afternoon.

He's clearly out of it; Steve had muttered something about drugs when he'd arrived back at the Wheeler's, palms cupping Billy's face.

But, to both their surprise, Billy's eyes seem to focus, zero in on Steve as if he isn't sure he's real. He shakes his head a little, closes his eyes.

Steve sighs. "Billy, we need to know what happened." He frowns, trying to think. "Was it Tommy? He's been kissing Jared's ass lately; given him an in with the football team." He pauses. "Didn't you mess around with Melanie a couple weeks ago? You know how he gets about his sister-"

Billy groans, loud, shoving weakly at Steve's face. "Jesus, Harrington, shut *up*. I'm fine."

Steve rolls his eyes, irritated but clearly relieved. "You sure, man?"

"Peachy," Billy huffs, lying back on his bed. "Now get out."

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Steve asks almost tentatively.

Billy jerks his head a little, shutting his eyes. He doesn't see the way Steve smiles fondly at him, if a little exasperated. He closes the door behind him softly.

Max stays stood at the end of Billy's bed, unsure once again.

"You standing there all night, brat?" Billy still doesn't look at her.

She opens her mouth to snark something in reply, wants to make him smile wickedly, wants everything to go back to the way it was this morning when he'd dropped her off, but her words die in her throat.

Billy must be able to sense it, that she isn't going to answer or leave. He grabs the pillow under his head and tosses it toward her blindly.

He turns onto his side, breath sharp, and keeps his back to her as she lays down on the floor.

She snags the blanket tucked in the corner of the room beneath a bomber jacket that looks too expensive and at least a size too small for him to have worn in the last few years. When she gets slightly curious and inspects it, it smells faintly of the hairspray she's seen some girls around school carry in their bags.

~

The next morning, she's awake before Billy, sometime around three-thirty.

She takes the opportunity to glance around his room. She roots through his still-unpacked boxes, peers under his bed and hastily retreats when she finds magazines she never wants to see or imagine her brother owning ever again.

Once she's finished nosing around, she takes a look at Billy himself. The bridge of his nose is still slightly crooked from the fight he'd had the month she and her mom had moved in, back in California. There are tiny pink scars littered about his face: one hidden in the shadow beneath his lip, another above his eyebrow that she can see now the blood's been wiped away. If it weren't for the fact that he was sleeping, she wouldn't have been able to get close enough to see them, let alone try and recall where he'd gotten them.

The chain around his neck catches the light as he shifts. She knows the pendant at the end of it is a madonna. She'd always assumed Billy had been Catholic before his mom, had lost his faith along with her but refused to lose the necklace, had instead clung to it. She wants to reach out and inspect it, but she leaves her hands at her sides, knowing Billy would wake up. He's one of the lightest sleepers

she's ever known.

The pendant is well-worn, concave with the slight impression of a thumb where it's been worried at for years.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Her eyes snap up to meet Billy's. He's watching her, motionless, like he's afraid she's wielding a bat behind her back.

She doesn't know how to explain why she's practically leant over him in his sleep at three in the morning, so she presses a gentle finger to the necklace. It's warm where it's been pressed against his bare skin.

He jolts upright and Max barely has time to stand back in order to avoid being headbutted. He seems a little out of it, like he has one hell of a hangover. She can't really say she's surprised. He glowers at her.

"Get out." His voice is low, gravelly with sleep.

"You're not Catholic."

He seems startled enough by the question that he momentarily forgets he wants her to leave. "What?"

By way of explanation, she gestures, "Your necklace."

He glances down at it, as if he hadn't remembered it being there. He grits his jaw for a long minute before glaring again. "It was my mom's," he grinds out.

She knows there's no point in trying to be subtle, gentle about it. "What happened to her?"

He stands up abruptly, a good head and then some above her in height, but he doesn't hold any advantage and he knows it. She knows this is what makes him cruel, callous.

"What the fuck do you want?" He spits defensively.

She rears up, holding her head high to challenge his scowl with her

own. "I want to know why you're such an asshole," she snaps, planting her feet.

He just stares at her for a good minute, jaw clenching. Then, running a hand through his hair and sitting back on the edge of his bed, he breathes, "She left."

He's so quiet that Max has to strain to hear him, worried she's misheard him.

She hadn't considered this possibility. She'd thought maybe she had died, probably cancer (if Billy's smoking habits are anything to go by) or something equally as shitty. Hell, she'd even entertained the idea that she might've gone missing, like those kids that had in Santa Maria back when she was twelve.

She blinks. "Why?" Her voice has lost all vehemence, barely a whisper.

He lets out a ragged breath, wet and pained. "I wish I fucking knew," he sneers.

He palms at the pockets of his jeans, pulling out a pack of cigarettes before he realises that he can't smoke in the house. He throws them across the room.

She tries to imagine her mom walking out someday, tomorrow, today; tries to imagine being left behind with Neil and Billy.

Billy's dad had scared her at first, and while she's still wary of him, of his temper, she's become aware of the fact that it's almost always Billy on the receiving end of it. She's always woken up when Billy gets home late, 'cause she hears the resulting arguments.

She doubts it could be called an argument though, after some thought. She's never heard Billy even raise his voice to his dad. It's surprising to her, considering how many fights he's gotten into lately, having no problem kicking up a fuss and basically asking for all the black eyes and split lips she's noticed come the morning. She doesn't know who he fights, neither had Steve when she'd asked him.

There are times when her mom'll know when those arguments are

coming and they'll go out for a couple hours, grocery shopping or something just as mundane and boring as hell, and when they get back Billy'll have retreated into his room. Those times, she doesn't see him for the rest of the day.

"What was she like?" She looks out window, watching the trees outside sway a little.

"Can't remember." She doesn't know if he's lying or being sincere 'cause he says it like if he doesn't answer fast enough, he won't believe it.

She wonders why Billy's mom would leave. Her mom had took her with her when she didn't want to be with her dad anymore, hadn't left her behind. She thinks, maybe, it wasn't anything to do with Billy, thinks of Neil's temper, thinks of the way he'd yelled at her for smashing a glass the other day, the way Billy had seemed to tremble for her.

She steels herself, just a little. "Does your dad hit you?" She hates how young she sounds when she asks, like some naive little kid that doesn't know when to shut up.

Billy scoffs. "You've seen him hit me," he dismisses.

"No," she shakes her head, trying to catch Billy's eye. "I mean, does he hurt you?" Billy's head snaps 'round so can look at her, incredulous, a warning in his expression. "Did he hurt you yesterday?"

He falters at that. It's all the answer she needs, the way he clams up, how he narrows his eyes. But, she thinks a little distantly, she had known all along. Now, Billy just knows she knows.

"What the fuck do you want from me?" He spits, and she can see it in his eyes how cornered he feels. *"Jesus Christ."*

"I want to hear you say it!"

"Get out," he hisses, venomous.

She's fixing herself a bowl of cereal, waiting for Billy to come out and get ready to drive her to school when Neil stumbles into the kitchen.

"Mom left early to go shopping," she calls.

He grunts, nodding.

She'd left some ibuprofen on the counter for Billy, 'cause she's nice like that. She regrets it almost immediately when Neil snatches it up, frowning.

"Why's this out?" He grumbles.

She can't lie, physically can't, and doesn't want him to yell if she doesn't answer; it's too early. "For Billy." She turns to find a spoon in the drawer a little hastily, eager to hide her face.

Neil's voice hardens. "Why?"

She opens her mouth, closes it, opens it again like she doesn't know how to answer 'cause she doesn't, is worried he'll yell at her, worried he'll yell at Billy when he hasn't even done anything yet. It's six in the morning, for fuck's sake.

Billy chooses that moment to step into the kitchen, rubbing at his hair where it's been flattened against his head during the night.

"What've you done now?" Neil sighs, eyebrows furrowed in irritation as he holds up the ibuprofen.

Billy freezes, stood as if he's looking down the barrel of a gun.

"Have you been drinking again?" Neil steps forward, gets in Billy's space.

He's close enough that Billy, forgetting the fact he's a few inches taller, drops his head, almost timidly. It's something Max has never seen before, something she'd never have expected from him, the conceited asshole that she knows him to be.

He shakes his head slightly, lips parting as he draws his eyes up to meet his father's. "No, sir."

Neil slaps him, lightly, just enough for Billy to startle a little, for Max to watch in horrified anticipation. "What have we talked about? Don't you lie to me."

Billy doesn't open his mouth again, just clenches his jaw, blinking rapidly.

"Don't get all quiet on me just 'cause your sister's here."

"Step-sister," Billy corrects automatically, just as Max would - to fucking *anyone* else.

Neil moves fast, grabs Billy by the collar of his wrinkled shirt and, quicker than Max can blink, has his back pressed against the wall. "What is it with you and respect?" He spits.

Billy isn't fighting him like Max would've probably bet her life he would, just raises his chin, a little defiant, a little pleading, baring his throat.

She steps forward hesitantly. "Neil," she tries, voice wavering.

His voice softens when he speaks next. "I've asked you to call me dad, sweetheart." It doesn't change the fact that she wants to run out of the room.

She swallows. "Dad." Billy shoots a glance at her, something unreadable in his eyes.

"I want to know what you were doing last night; I know you went out." Billy just stares, his eyes betraying the terror that's curled cold around his spine. "Go to your room, please, Maxine." He turns to watch her over his shoulder, hand still fisted in the material of Billy's shirt. "It's okay. Me and Billy are just going to have a little talk."

She doesn't move toward her bedroom door, shuffles a little closer toward the two instead. "You're scaring me." She's more afraid she's going to cry. She can see Billy's fists curled up, shaking hard at his sides. "You're scaring Billy."

"Am I?" He turns back toward his son, alarmingly calm, almost mocking. "Am I scaring you?"

Billy shakes his head minutely again, exhaling a little shakily through his nose. He hisses in discomfort when his dad presses him further into the wall, glowering.

Max reaches out, tentatively grips Neil's sleeve.

"Maxine," he doesn't look at her, just growls in warning. "Go to your room."

She tugs at his sleeve, trying to pull him away from Billy.

He does, surprisingly. Only, he turns to her and slaps her across the face. She staggers back, not hurt, more shaken than anything.

"I'm not going to ask you again, Maxine."

It's strange, to all of a sudden have a terrifying and unsettling insight into Billy's childhood, into the past few years she had lived under the same roof as them and hadn't *really* understood. She feels a little moronic if anything.

Neil steps forward, clearly trying to herd her toward her room, but Billy's quicker.

He grabs his father by the shoulder, tightens his hand into a shaky fist and catches him with an uppercut to the jaw. Neil drops to the floor like a stone, dazed and pawing at the linoleum for purchase as he struggles with his bad leg to get to his feet. Billy's just stood there, fists trembling as sharp, shuddering breaths are torn from him.

She darts to his side, clutching at his arm.

He jerks a little, unsurely, but he ultimately moves, gripping Max's hand and towing her along as he sprints for the door.

~

Mrs. Byers sits her at the table beside Will. Billy is refusing to meet Jonathan's eye, keeping his gaze locked firmly on his lap.

She almost tells her they'd already eaten breakfast, but she realises Billy hasn't. She thanks her and tears into her second bowl of cereal



that morning as Billy sits there quietly, jaw clenching rhythmically as he twists a spoon between his fingers.

“I’m gonna go smoke,” he mutters, mostly to himself, looking like he wants to bolt as the chair scrapes.

He closes the screen door behind him, heads turning to watch him as he sits on the porch, just a little slow and cautious, as if he’s afraid of falling over. Mrs. Byers tears her eyes from him, looking all too sad and world-weary at her battered table with a cigarette between her thin fingers. Despite it though, she visibly steels herself and stands, as though she’s facing an army.

“Do you want anything, honey?” She asks Max, smile strained. She can feel it when her eyes flicker to the red mark on her cheek.

She tries to grin brightly, as she usually seems to whenever she’s here, but she’s left with the feeling of being cracked open for the world to see, bared and vulnerable, so she quickly averts her eyes. “I’m good. Thanks.”

She watches Mrs. Byers follow Billy outside, tendrils of smoke trailing behind her.

Will scoots his chair closer to hers. “What happened?”

“Just-“ She doesn’t know how to finish that sentence. Doesn’t know what to tell him and what to leave out.

She knows Billy wouldn’t want her to tell anyone anything. So she just shrugs.

“We had an argument with Neil.”

He bites his lip, eyes darting from her face when she catches him scrutinising her face.

Jonathan clears his throat, and she’s grateful for the way he tries to avoid the lingering silences. “Do you want me to drop you off at school?”

“I’m gonna stay with Billy.” She’s quiet when she speaks after a long

pause. She isn't sure why, but there's something coiling in her chest that's refusing to let her leave him alone.

Jonathan simply nods, Will returning to his breakfast with a hesitant smile.

She stands to move by the screen door, resting her shoulder against the doorframe, listening.

Mrs. Byers' voice is gentle, soothing as she offers Billy a light. "Steve is going to be a good man."

Billy flinches at that, almost drops his cigarette. Joyce smiles carefully.

"He already is." Billy's voice is gruff, low, like the words are being pulled from him against his will.

"My boys' father wasn't a good man, in a way I think you might be familiar with." Billy stays quiet, goes unnaturally still. His eyes are fixed ahead of him, unseeing. "I made this house a safe place for them when he left; didn't want them thinking that was how things were done." She turns to him then, hand resting lightly over his arm, an offering. "You and Max always have a place here. God knows there're kids here most of the time anyway." She laughs, and it's a brittle thing, but she doesn't falter, doesn't hesitate to pat Billy's shoulder as she gets up.

She catches sight of Max through the screen door and smiles. Max takes that as a cue to step outside, thanking her under her breath as Joyce passes her.

She sits beside Billy on the porch where Mrs. Byers had been. "You okay?"

"Is everyone gonna come and sit with me?" His tone is light but there's no humour in his voice.

He turns his head slightly and she can see the way his eyes linger on her face, just a second too long. "I'm fucking *fine*, Jesus Christ." She rolls her eyes.

Billy chuckles. He takes a long drag of his cigarette. "He shouldn't

have hit you.”

“And what? He should be allowed to do it to you? That’s bullshit and you know it.” She knows her nose has scrunched up in that way that Billy likes to take the piss out of her for, but she doesn’t care. She lowers her voice when she asks next, “So.” She pauses for a moment too long for them to be comfortable with the silence. “What now?”

He turns his head again, hair falling over his face so she can’t see his eyes through the curls. He shrugs, stiff.

She buries her face in her hands. “Jesus,” she moans. She feels sick.

Joyce’s voice calls out to her then from inside the house before the door screeches. “Max, honey,” her voice is gentle, caring. Max smiles weakly at her over her shoulder, her elbow brushing Billy’s as she turns. “Your mom’s on the phone, sweetheart.”

She stands up, brushes any dirt or dust from her jeans and looks down at Billy. He doesn’t seem intent on moving any time soon. “Thanks, Mrs. Byers. I’ll be there in a second.” Billy looks up at her then and she sets a hand on his shoulder delicately. She’s surprised when he doesn’t shake it off.

She doesn’t know what she wants to say, but she feels that Billy gets it regardless.

~